

# Priceless Pearl Harbor memory

JOHN SCOTT



MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

John Scott holds a U.S. government check for \$4.10 reimbursing him for personal items lost when his battleship, the Oklahoma, went down in the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Scott has kept the check as a souvenir.

SR veteran survived attack  
saves \$4.10 government  
check as souvenir

By CHRIS SMITH

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Along with his memories of Pearl Harbor, ex-sailor John W. Scott of Santa Rosa has a memento to that he could take to the bank.

It's a U.S. government check dated May 1, 1942. Made payable to John W. Scott in the amount of \$4.10, it was intended to reimburse him for personal possessions he left behind the previous Dec. 7 when he climbed in a hatch from the belly of a mortally wounded battleship.

Scott, now 84, could have cashed the check during the war when a Coca-Cola cost a nickel and four bucks was a decent amount of pocket cash. Instead he tucked the check away.

"I thought, what the heck, I might as well have something without a souvenir."

Where he was on the first Sunday of December, 1941, was in a bunk three decks below in the battleship USS Oklahoma. His brother, Rodney Scott, who served on the same ship, had come by sometime after 7:30 a.m. to ask if he wanted to go into Honolulu.

"I said no," remembered John Scott. "I was going to sleep."

Just before 8 a.m., he awoke with a start he'll never forget. An officer's voice blasted over the ship's loudspeakers.

"He said, 'All hands, man the battle stations. This is the real thing!'"

Scott, a former Navy storekeeper who became a financial wizard with the Sonoma County tax collector's office, remembers how the Oklahoma shuddered with the first torpedo hit, then the second and third.

"I counted at least five," Scott said.

Quickly, the great ship began to list. With no time to collect his wallet, eyeglasses and other possessions, Scott scooted up a ladder to the main deck.

He dove into the harbor, his water by then coated with a thick layer of spilled fuel oil, just as the Oklahoma rolled onto her side. As he tread water, he took in an astonishing scene of destruction, chaos and death.

"I thought to myself, 'You're never going to see something like this as long as you live.'"

He remembers seeing bullets hit the water, and looking up to see a low-flying Japanese fighter bomber. Scott made eye contact with the machine-gunner in the plane's rear seat.

"I waved to him and he quit shooting at me," he said. "Just as he got out of reach, he waved back."

Scott looked in disbelief at the 27,000-ton Oklahoma, which capsized after being punctured by five torpedoes. Twenty of her officers and 395 enlisted men were either killed or went missing.

Scott was worrying about his brother when a rescue boat pulled up. A sailor reached down to pull him from the oily water — it was Rodney.

Both brothers survived the war. Rodney Scott died earlier this year in Reno, at age 86.

John Scott was stationed in Australia when, in 1942, he received the \$4.10 check. An enclosed note explained it was reimbursement for "watches and toilet articles" lost in the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The former sailor never goes to movies, but he plans to see "Pearl Harbor," which opens on Friday. He has no plans to cash his check, which today wouldn't pay for popcorn and a soda.

"It's just a souvenir, that's all," he said.

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